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Brei, Claßen, Heiler, Hornberg: Use and Perception of Urban (Industrial) Forests

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USE AND PERCEPTION OF URBAN (INDUSTRIAL) FORESTS

Background and Aims

Urban nature and green areas are of a high value for public health (physical activity, climate adaptation strategies, reducing hazardous substances, etc.). The industrial forest Rheinelbe in Gelsenkirchen (Germany) also constitutes a health-promoting resource, especially for the local population. The extent to which this resource can unfold its various potentials, depends on how it is or is not used. Decisive factors here can be how the public perceives it as well as eventual obstacles to its use. In order to determine non-use, perception and possible obstacles to use in various population groups, in 2008/2009 a study was carried out on the use (or non-use) of the industrial forest by the (local) population.

Methods

In 2008 a conceptual study was done on procedures for developing the industrial forest (on-site observation, surveying, interviewing experts). As part of a follow-up study in 2009, a mail survey was taken of the population in the adjoining city district. The bilingual questionnaire developed specifically for this purpose included quantitative and (semi-)qualitative items which were then evaluated as descriptive statistics and compared with the results of the concept study.

Results

The industrial forest is used for rest and leisure, its road also for non-motor transport. People visiting the forest report positive health effects (e.g. relaxation, good air quality) and active/passive nature experience. While those surveyed in the forest reported coming there to visit it often, residents from the adjoining area came over less often. Furthermore, individuals with an immigrant background visited the forest less often than did natives. Potential obstacles to visiting the forest were feelings of low personal safety (dependent on gender and/or nationality), no knowledge of the forest, and little or no feelings of identity with the former colliery's area.

Conclusions

Visitors surveyed on site and people surveyed by mail in adjoining areas perceived the industrial forest as an important and long-term health factor. From a health sciences viewpoint, the salutogenic potential of natural urban green areas need to be communicated more broadly and clearly so these areas will be used by as many population groups as possible. Further research is needed to determine how the effect of targeted, long-term, target group-specific measures can be embedded already at the planning stage.